

# Elevated Blood Lead Levels in Adults Fact Sheet

## **What is an elevated blood lead level?**

When a lab test finds lead in the blood, it means the person has been exposed to lead in the environment. Any lead exposure has risk. When the level of lead in the blood reaches 25µg/dL in an adult, the lab result has to be reported to the health department.

## **Who is at risk of having elevated blood lead levels?**

About 95% of all reported elevated blood lead levels in adults in the United States are work-related. Occupations with the greatest risk include battery manufacturing, lead smelting, sandblasting, soldering, automobile repair, and construction. Other risk factors for adult lead exposure include repairing automobiles at home, shooting firearms, using folk remedies (including Greta and Azarcon), repairing electronics, making stained glass or jewelry, painting/paint removal, remodeling, making moonshine, or living near landfill and hazardous waste sites.

## **How do people get exposed to lead?**

Lead can enter the body by being breathed in or swallowed. Lead can be in soil, water, dust (such as from old paint), toys, and traditional cosmetics and medicines.

## **What are the symptoms?**

Lead can affect multiple systems of the body and many people with elevated blood lead levels do not have any symptoms. Some common symptoms that can occur include loss of appetite, constipation, nausea, insomnia, irritability, headache, muscle/joint pain, anxiety, weakness, hyperactivity, tremor, numbness, dizziness, abdominal pain, metallic taste, and high blood pressure.

## **How soon do symptoms appear?**

Symptoms might not appear until dangerous amounts of lead have accumulated in the blood.

## **How are adults tested for lead exposure?**

A venous (from a vein) blood sample is usually collected and submitted to an approved laboratory.

## **How is an elevated blood lead level in an adult treated?**

For adults with very high levels of lead in the blood, lead may be removed by a treatment called chelation. Chelation therapy can have adverse effects, and clinicians should first consult with a medical toxicologist before they begin treatment for lead toxicity. The primary "treatment" for elevated blood lead levels is to reduce or prevent further exposure to lead.

## **What can be done to prevent adult lead exposure?**

Worker safety procedures should be in place if lead is used in a workplace to ensure lead levels in the air are as low as possible and workers are further protected by using protective clothing and respirators. If working in a lead prone occupation, wash hands and face before eating or drinking, eat and drink in areas free of lead dust and fumes, change into different clothes and shoes before

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working with lead, shower after working with lead before going home, and wash clothes separately from other family members' clothes.

## How can I learn more about elevated blood lead levels?

- If you have concerns about lead exposure, contact your healthcare provider.
- For additional information contact the Virginia Department of Health's Office of Epidemiology, [Division of Environmental Epidemiology](#).
- Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/>.
- Visit the [Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry](#)

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